

To Whom it May Concern,

I'm in favor of expanding the school meal program to cover all children so that the public school system is fair and equal to all who attend. Making lunch free for everyone is the only way that families who are earning lower incomes can feel equality within the system because otherwise their children are going to be treated differently than children of wealthier families. It is an issue of equal rights. Applying for help is sometimes embarrassing and disempowering for families who are a part of the community and who may not want their financial situation to be made public. By completing an application for help, families' personal financial information becomes public knowledge to at least a few individuals within the school community. Depending on the individual, that information may become widely known despite any confidentiality policies.

From another perspective; children receiving free lunch are ashamed of themselves and their families as a result of being different. I work in a professional role helping families who are struggling with strained budgets, but I remember how I learned that I was "poor" as a kid. I learned it through the free lunch tickets they handed out at school. I understand that this method of issuing raffle tickets each day is no longer used, but students still know who gets free lunch because there are subtle differences. Also, children will know it about themselves because they will bring in the paperwork and hand it off to the secretary in the office or to their classroom teacher; it's a terrible way to learn that you are different. It feels like charity each and every lunch period and it's unhealthy for kids who just want to be like everyone else.

Drawing on my experience as the Director of a food pantry for twelve years, I can tell you that it is often the families who are just above the income guidelines for SNAP or free and reduced lunch who really need the help. The income guidelines for the programs are usually so low that they fall far below what would be considered a middle-class livable wage. It creates a gap between deep poverty and the middle class where families are ineligible for programs that help. There is also a lag time for applying to SNAP, unemployment and other programs that help because they look back on the previous six weeks of employment income. What this means is that when someone loses their job or finds themselves in need unexpectedly due to death of a spouse, diagnosis of illness, accident, injury or leaving an abusive partner, they have to wait for at least 2 months before any benefits start; who supports them during their most vulnerable time? We have a chance to do something about this for the children of every family; not just families suffering from extreme poverty but families who struggle because working parents aren't paid a living wage for their work. Many of the children who fall into this in-between category are children of our first responders and healthcare workers.

Let's do the right thing and continue what has been working so well for so long by offering school meals at no cost to our growing students so we can ensure that they are physically prepared to learn.

Sincerely,

Erin Kennedy, M.S.O.L.

Northwestern CT Community College

Continuing Education/Workforce Development and SNAP Employment & Training Program Coordinator